

New Voices from Middletown: Research in Fiction

An Honors Thesis (ENG 444)

by

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Abstract

Researched fiction may sound daunting, but it is certainly no less creative or fun than what some may consider more traditional literary fiction. Researching the time, place, history, culture, etc. of the subject matter of one's story allows the author to more fully inhabit this quasi-imagined world and to write convincingly. For this project, I delve into 1960s Muncie, Indiana, and project my research onto the fictional Middletown, Indiana, crafting a short story about young love, the Vietnam War, being gay in 1966 Indiana, and figuring out where to go and who to be at the crossroads of high school graduation. In addition to the story, I include a detailed author's statement explaining my research process, how it informed my creative writing, and how I have grown as a student of English and as a researcher.

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The Possibility of Having Fun with Research

“Research” has always been associated for me with words like “boring,” “arduous,” “tedious,” “overwhelming,” and so on. And I think all those words can still apply at times, but thankfully they did not apply in this case. (Okay, “overwhelming” still applied sometimes, but I think that one’s unavoidable.) This project gave me a chance to have a lot of fun with research—something I’m not sure I even knew was possible.

As part of my English degree, I had to complete a senior seminar. The section of ENG 444 I chose to enroll in was called Research and Fiction Writing and would focus on the Middletown studies of Muncie, Indiana. We would conduct research on Muncie, create our own fictional “Middletown,” compose short stories set there, and link them together as a class into an anthology. To be honest, at the outset, I was not especially excited. I didn’t consider myself a creative writer, I was scared by the thought of conducting so much independent research, and the topic seemed very dull. Muncie? Really? I’ve lived here my entire life, and, while I certainly didn’t hate this town, I wasn’t totally sold on the notion that there were interesting, story-worthy things to be discovered. (That’s an embarrassing sentence; I am embarrassed to have thought those things. But I am overjoyed to have been proven entirely wrong.) My thoughts started to shift pretty immediately as we got started working and dipped our toes into the research by visiting the Bracken Library Archives. If you ever feel like you’re lacking some excitement in your life, go talk to a librarian—seriously. One hour just getting a peek into the history of Muncie I could explore got me giddy with excitement for the upcoming project. My home! This place I had known for twenty-two years was showing me new things and reminding me of all the old things. I had found a new affection for this little Hoosier town, and I was ready to dive into this research full of love.

The story I ended up writing focuses on Julia, a graduating high school senior in 1966 Middletown. She's struggling with whether or not she wants stay at home and follow the path her parents want for her. She's interested in the Vietnam War but doesn't have anyone to talk to about it. And she falls in love with a girl named Maggie. Pretty straightforward premise; full of heart.

My first foray into research for this project was the Middletown documentary *Seventeen*. I knew that I wanted to write about young people in some way, and this was a pretty incredible start. The film captures the senior year of a group of high schoolers in late-1970s Muncie, Indiana. It documents the everyday lives of these teenagers, including interracial dating, sex, pregnancy, success in/after high school, drinking and socializing, dealing with grief, and kids' relationships with their parents and teachers. The fact that the film never aired makes for a significant note. Teenage audiences confirmed that the film accurately portrayed what it's like to be a teenager. This is the reality that gets covered up. Although the time period of this film doesn't match the one for my story, I still found it useful in its helping to reinforce the ideas I already had about being a teenager in the Midwest. If I can see that these teenagers in the '70s were no different than the teenagers I went to school with in the 2000s, then it probably follows that teenagers in the '60s were quite similar—at least in the ways that mattered.

Next, I talked to my dad. Teenagers seem to have been mostly the same at their cores for some time, but I needed to find out how the surfaces differed in 1966 and how the context of a different time affected interactions between people. That year, my dad was a high school junior in Muncie, Indiana (the real equivalent of our fictional Middletown). We discussed citizens' attitudes about the Vietnam War, students' plans for after high school, and perceptions of gay and lesbian students and adults. My dad likes to tell stories, and I like to listen to them, so we

sometimes got off track from specific material I wanted to address. However, I think that all of the information, though maybe not entirely relevant to this project, is important and potentially useful. Honestly, it's hard for me to look at any of the research I did as "not useful." Plenty of research didn't make a direct impact on the content of my story, but it all made indirect impacts. Everything I consumed added to the mindset I needed to be in and the world I needed to inhabit in order to write convincingly. However, I was glad to get from my dad confirmation that the plot points of my story sounded right and made sense for the time: if you were gay in 1966, California was the place to be.

Then I delved into 1966. It was great hearing from someone who was alive then, but my dad's stories were filtered by the fifty years he's lived since then. I needed a voice from 1966 *in* 1966. "The Homosexual in America" is an anonymous essay published in *TIME* in January of 1966. It discusses some of the social practices of gay culture and focuses heavily on the shifting perceptions of homosexuality in America. Still taboo at this time, homosexuality seems to be being met with more responses of "tolerance, empathy or apathy." It's one thing to hear about past attitudes towards homosexuality, but it is entirely another to actually see it. The essay is mostly straightforward and journalistic, but the blatant and casual homophobia throughout is deeply unsettling. It is an accurate portrayal of the time. The essay helped get me into the mindset of 1966 society. These are the attitudes that many people had, and these are the things that gay kids were faced with every day. It's unfortunate that lesbianism is often left out of the conversation about homosexuality, but even that—the presence of its absence—helped me to form a clearer picture of the story I was trying to tell. My protagonist, Julia, knew that she was different and knew that Indiana was not a welcoming place for her. She knew that California

would be a better fit—but still not a perfect fit. Even in the gay community, a place where she belonged, she was still marginalized as a woman.

Before I started any actual writing, I had to decide on my characters' names. Maybe another writer could have started writing without having them pinned down exactly, but names are important to me. I knew what kinds of characters I wanted these young women to be, but choosing their names helped both solidify the ideas I already had and gave me room to flesh out the characters and have them grow into their names. "Julia" means "youthful" and was the 118th most popular girl's name in 1948. "Margaret" means "child of light" and was the 17th most popular girl's name in 1946. Honestly, I chose the names without even looking at their meanings simply because I liked them—but it turns out the meanings fit nicely with their respective characters. Maggie is a bright, vibrant woman who drew Julia in with her energy—with her light. And Julia is definitely young—though she grows over the course of the story.

As I actually began drafting my story, I spent some time looking up popular songs of 1965 and '66 to see what my characters would have been listening to. It felt like procrastinating at the time—just an in-depth process to find some music to listen to while I wrote—but I soon realized it was *research*. Knowing what music was popular during a certain time period can play a big role in gaining a better understanding of its culture. Music is pervasive, and the moods and messages in popular songs are representative of at least some of the cultural attitudes of the time. Reading through these Billboard charts and then listening to the songs on them was extremely beneficial in helping me get into the right mindset and inhabit the right world to write my story. So many things can be modified or fudged a little throughout the process of writing researched fiction, but I wanted to get the music right. I could have chosen some cheesy love song to have been playing when Julia and Maggie first met, but "These Boots Are Made for Walking" is what

was popular at the time and what would have actually been playing at this party, and I wanted it to feel authentic. It's interesting how sometimes making a choice that doesn't fit perfectly actually makes for a better overall product.

To go hand-in-hand with 1966 music, I took a look at issues of *Vogue* from that year as well. What would my characters have been poring over on their bedroom floors on Wednesday afternoons? These issues of *Vogue* from January through June of 1966 showcase the high fashion of the time, targeted towards women, through photos of models in designer clothing, in addition to extensive advertisements for items such as beauty and hair products and so on. *Vogue* does not necessarily represent what teenagers of the time were wearing every day, but it does represent the style trends of the time and what, perhaps, young women were aspiring to. It was helpful and exhilarating to be able to hold in my hands and look at materials that my fictional characters would have held and looked at. The physicality of the magazines brought me into the world more. I created these characters and their circumstances, but the time they inhabit was real. Holding things these made-up people could have held helped bring them to life. These magazines allowed me to more fully inhabit the minds of my characters and portray them more accurately and with more nuance.

Additionally, I stumbled across a particular picture in *Vogue* that jumped out at me: just two young women dancing together. These women don't necessarily look like Julia and Maggie, but there are similar elements, and the overall experience of the photograph is what really drew me in. It *could* be Julia and Maggie. There isn't a scene in the story of them dancing together, but when I saw this picture it felt like I had found a moment of my characters' lives that had been documented by someone else. It made them more real to me, and it helped me think about them more fully and more complexly.



At the onset of our research as a class, we read Debra Spark's "Raiding the Larder," an essay on writing researched fiction. The revisit I made to this article at the end of my research process helped bring everything together and gave me some perspective on the journey I had completed. It made me think about the choices I made through research and writing, and it kind of reassured me that I had made the right choices. Some of the inspiration for my story came from my real life, and it was a strange process of editing these real experiences to make them

better—or at least better-suited for a contained short story. Just because something really happened doesn't mean it's a good story. So, I had to edit my actual experiences, and I had to edit my research, too. In a literary analysis paper, which is what I'm much more accustomed to writing, the research gets lights shone on it. In researched fiction, though, the research needs to be invisible. This has consistently been one of the hardest parts of doing this research and writing this story. I do all this research and I want to say, "Hey! Look! I did all this research!" But "imagining in a convincing way," as Spark says, is a very helpful way of thinking about what it is I'm creating. This is not a research paper. I just had to figure out how to immerse myself in that world and then write from my new perspective. Find the natural space and voice; be convincing. Remembering that everything I put into the story has to be there for a reason, has to contribute and move the story forward in some way, was the most important thing that I had to constantly keep in mind throughout this process.

Here, at the end, as I often feel at the ends of things, I wish I had known at the beginning what I know now. Impossible, of course, as the only way of really getting to know something is to experience it—but now I'm ready for something else. I could do this again or something similar and be so much more prepared and ready to blow it out of the water. I've discovered this semester that research can actually be fun: it can be relaxed and exciting, and you can just follow the things you want to know more about. I want to learn about things that interest me and then create things with the knowledge I've gained. It sounds so simple—how strange it's taken me so long to figure out.

Not only have I gained all these skills as a researcher and writer, but I've also created something I'm really proud of. This story and research will contribute to the Middletown Studies, and it will be available to people looking to find out more about life in Indiana and in

small-town America. And my research will contribute a little more diversity than was there before. As our class got started on these projects and we looked at the first Middletown studies, we learned a lot about white, heterosexual Muncie, Indiana—but not much else. We wanted to bring more voices to the table, and that is what I hope to have done here. Learning about being gay in 1960s Indiana has helped me make more connections to being gay in 2010s Indiana than I maybe thought were there. I hope my story helps remind people of some of the quieter voices of history, and I hope people are encouraged to keep reading and learning and uncovering the stories we seldom or never hear.

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The End of All Things and Also the Beginning

Rachel Crawley

(1966)

God, she's fucking beautiful.

How I managed to end up here, I still don't know. Lying on this mattress on the floor of this tiny apartment in Indianapolis, next to the most amazing human I've met in my eighteen years. Her curls splayed out on the floral sheets--she could be sleeping in a garden.

It's weird to watch her sleep, right? But all I can think is how this is exactly the way I wanna wake up every day for the rest of forever. Maybe not in Indianapolis... But who knows. The way the sun's hitting her face right now could probably persuade me to do anything.

Maggie looks nothing like Nancy Sinatra. She's taller and curvier and curlier and louder. But "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'" was playing the first time I saw her, and it was like the universe was calling out to me. Now, "These Boots" is not exactly a love song--and by "not exactly" I mean it's not. But it is a sexy song, and there would be plenty of time for love later. I was attracted to her energy immediately. Totally out of my comfort zone at this anti-war rally-turned-after-party, her warmth drew me in. No way was I going to introduce myself, but I managed to hover in her general vicinity until she noticed me and said what I couldn't: "Hi."

She liked me, too--I could tell. ("I've never met a 'Julia' before," she said. "What a beautiful name.") I made a bad joke, and she laughed anyway. She touched my arm, and it sent electricity through us both. Months later she would tell me how nervous she had been--how cool and collected I seemed in contrast to her wild heat. I'd thought she *had* to know how nervous I

was. I was so excited to talk about the war with someone, and I was just trying not to scare her away. If I knew then that I loved her--or would love her--that knowledge was swallowed by my desperation to just hold onto this person I could *talk to*. And, anyway, I think that's probably where love often begins.

We tucked away into a corner and just talked. I told her my parents didn't want to talk about anything--god forbid the war--god forbid being *against* the war. She told me her older brother signed up for the Marines as fast as he could. We were scared, and we didn't know what to do, and we were trying to do something, anyway.

She was twenty and had been sort of floating around since graduating high school. She said college didn't really make sense for her, and I was exhilarated to meet someone living outside of the plan my parents had for me and the plan my friends' parents had for them. I was going to graduate in June and stay at home and attend Middletown University in the fall. Right?

I'm making coffee, and Maggie stirs. I worry I was being too loud, but--

"It's so nice being woken up by the sun," she says. "Let's go somewhere it's always spring."

"You mean there are places in the world where it doesn't hurt to be outside four months out of the year?"

She chuckles, mumbles something affirmative into my neck, and wraps the bed sheet around both of us. I've gotten used to her presence over the last few months, but I don't think I'll ever tire of it. My parents are physically distant as well as emotionally, so I didn't grow up with a lot of hugging. Boy, was I missing out.

"Are you excited for tonight? Nervous?" she asks.

“Something like that,” I say. It’s prom night. As far as Ed and Rosemary Thornburg, those precious parents of mine, know, their beloved daughter Julia will be dancing her heart out with some baseball player named Josh. Getting the “complete” “high school” “experience.” Or something. In reality, I’ll be at a protest with the ever-lovely Margaret Evans. Probably not in an evening gown, but I guess we’ll see.

We’ve been going to little rallies and call-out meetings together ever since that first one in February, but the one tonight is different. We’re finally doing something instead of just talking about it, and it’s supposed to have the biggest turnout yet. So, maybe crowds are not my favorite thing. So, maybe I’m a little nervous. But honestly it just feels good to be *doing something*. I have all this energy that was just driving me crazy before I gave it a direction, before Maggie helped me focus it. There’s something wrong with this country for having this war at all, and there’s something wrong with my parents and the people of Middletown for not speaking up. I have to speak up.

“JULES!” I can hear Maggie screaming. “JULIA!!” Just my name, over and over. I scream back, but I can’t see her. I can’t even tell where her voice is coming from. We weren’t supposed to get separated. None of this was supposed to happen.

But what does that even mean--“supposed to.” “Supposed to” doesn’t mean shit when you’re being pushed into the backseat of a cop car and the great love of your tiny, huge life is screaming for you somewhere you can’t help her.

I’d spend most weekends in Indy with her, but we’d sit in my bedroom in Middletown on weekday afternoons when she wasn’t working. My bedroom and my backyard and down by the

river and the library and the diner. Anywhere. We'd sit anywhere in Indiana and talk about being anywhere else.

Middletown is the only home I've ever known. And, okay, surely there are worse places to live. Maggie thinks I have Stockholm Syndrome, but I do truly love it. She talks about leaving, though, and I can't help but wonder if I need to get out. We could go somewhere with better weather, better politics, better sights, whatever. But she says we could go somewhere where we wouldn't have to be just friends or just roommates. We'll never be normal. We'll never be those couples on *The Newlywed Game*. And I don't know if I'd even want that. But maybe we wouldn't have to hide so much. We could find other people who understand.

We sprawled out on a picnic blanket on the riverbank under these abandoned train tracks. The area didn't get a lot of foot traffic, so it became kind of a private place for the two of us--a retreat from the Middle West, tucked away somewhere in the midst of it all. April was wet, but we couldn't resist that springtime smell. I moved a piece of her hair and kissed her like I do when we're alone. Natural. Easy. Quiet. I probably made a decision then. I didn't think it, and I didn't say it. But something shifted in that moment. The kiss itself was, I suppose, unremarkable. But the stars must have been aligned because the sound of the river and the smell of the air and the taste of her mouth all came together for me in that moment--and I knew there was no way we could say goodbye to each other just yet.

"I can't believe you called your parents. I mean. I can. I know you had to call your parents. But, oh, my god, you called your parents."

Ed and Rosemary come into view, and Maggie seems to be freaking out quite enough for the both of us. I should be scared, right? Nervous, guilty--something. But all I feel is fucking *relieved*.

My sneaking around for the protests hasn't been especially involved. My parents don't ask a lot of questions, and they've never had much reason to distrust me. They've met Maggie in passing. They know I've been spending a lot of time with her, but I'm not sure they understand in what capacity. They like her well enough, I think; she's hard not to like. But I know they're wary of her being older and living in the city--a little concerned that she may be a bad influence but not concerned enough to confront me about it.

This is the confrontation, though.

... Sort of. Always keen to avoid a public scene, my parents take care of whatever legal stuff needs to be taken care of quietly (they bail out Maggie, too--bless their hearts), and we all walk briskly to the car. Silent.

We drop Maggie off at her apartment, and my mother pretends to be not horrified at the neighborhood. It isn't until we're out of the city and on the highway back to Middletown that anyone says anything about the reason we're all here tonight.

"So, you weren't at the prom," my dad says.

"No," I reply.

"You were at a Vietnam War protest in downtown Indianapolis," my mom says.

"Yes," I reply.

It goes back and forth like this for a while, very cut and dry, as my parents get filled in on what I've been up to the past few months. They're confused, but they're taking it pretty well. But then I tell them I'm thinking about taking some time off after graduation, maybe traveling for a

year or two, seeing what the world outside of Indiana has to offer me. That goes over less successfully.

“What the hell’s wrong with Indiana?” / “What about college?” The front half of the car is now filled with considerably more emotion than it was a few minutes ago.

“Your mother and I have seen the world outside of Indiana, and, let me tell you, it’s not much,” Dad spits from the front seat.

“You lived in Colorado for like eight months twenty years ago!” My parents did a short stint in Boulder after they got married, but apparently they hated it and decided Indiana was the only place they wanted to start a family and build a life together. We’re all born-and-bred Middletowners, and my dad seems personally offended even at the suggestion that I might live somewhere else.

Mom’s more worried about school, which I can better understand. I guess I’m worried about school, too. If not college, then what? Marriage? Yikes. But I tell her it’s not off the table entirely--just not right now.

We make it home in one piece. Ed and Rosemary say we’ll continue the discussion in the morning, and they’re off to bed.

I make a quick call to Maggie from the kitchen to see how she’s feeling and to fill her in on the details of the drive home. We’re both exhausted, but the worst is over, I think--at least with the parents. The subject has been breached. Now it’s just a matter of getting them comfortable with it. Or comfortable enough to let me go without excommunicating me.

“I love you,” she says.

“I love you, too,” I whisper. I hang up the phone, tiptoe upstairs, and collapse into bed.

We know we're young. And that awareness is exactly what's allowing us to do what we're doing. Young love (usually) doesn't last forever. We know it. We've talked about it. We are first and foremost friends, and we will support each other through anything--even if that eventually means leaving each other.

So, it's maybe short-lived, but, god, *you know what young love feels like*. What any love feels like, I hope. We're fucking invincible. There is a fire inside each of us, and it just feels like the dumbest god damn thing to pour water on it now. We are both ready to take the next step in our lives, and we're excited to do it together.

My mom's sister, Deb, has a spare room in her California apartment she's generously offered to rent to us for cheap until we find our footing. It's not exactly the dream: living with my girlfriend...with Aunt Deb. But it's not Middletown, and I think that's probably the most important part. I love it here--I really do. But it's time to fall in love with a new place. Maybe San Francisco can be that place.

No one saw this coming: Julia Thornburg skipping town to go be a waitress in California. But I don't think anything has ever felt so right. And that's weird for me. I like order and planning, and, yes, this is a plan. We have a plan. But it's a loose one. There is so much room to move around and feel out what we want to do--figure out what we can do. We can do...anything. A year ago this would have terrified me. But, hey, I guess that's getting older.